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Islam as a Multivocal Influence in Indonesia and Nigeria

10.1 Islam: Obvious but unsatisfactory

The obvious answer to the question *Why do Muslim countries have low employment levels for women?* is suggested by the question itself: because they are Muslim. Islamic religion is supposed to lead to low employment levels, as discussed elaborately in the previous chapters. Even if we ignore the diversity shown in Chapter 6 and accept the claim that Muslim countries have (on average) lower female employment rates than other countries, it has not been sufficiently proven that this is due to Islam. At the core of the civilizationist conclusions are general theoretical statements about Islam’s supposedly inherent conservatism or misogyny (see Chapter 2), which are supposed to prevent women from entering the labour market. Their empirical tests are limited to a crude focus on religious denomination and aggregate population measures to explain low employment.

In this chapter, I apply the theoretical framework of this book to the theme ‘religion’ in the hope of gaining a more precise understanding of whether and how Islam impacts women’s employment in Muslim countries, and religion on women’s position more generally. Section 10.2 reflects shortly on the rather black-and-white debate in the current literature, and in line with the more general discussion on the influence of values, I present a more nuanced argument about how Islam can have multiple effects at the same time. I do this by distinguishing between different strands and different manifestations of Islam. Next, I provide background information on Indonesia and Nigeria (Section 10.3). As previous chapters have shown, both Indonesia and Nigeria have relatively high employment levels, and they have large non-Muslim populations, so the civilizationist argument should
hold there, if anywhere. Section 10.4 presents information on the new data, after which the districts- and individual-level differences in employment and religion are analysed, which shows the importance of religion as well as the empirical shortcomings of civilizationist argument (Section 10.5). Additionally, I assess the generalizability of the results based on the other DDW data on religious denomination, and this shows that Indonesia and Nigeria are not exceptions (Section 10.6). The broader implications of the analyses bring this chapter to a close (Section 10.7).

10.2 Linking Islam to women’s employment

10.2.1 To influence or not to influence?

In discussing gender issues, many scholars tend to think in terms of civilizations, particularly contrasting the ‘Western’ and the ‘Islamic’ civilizations (e.g. Clark et al., 1991; Fish, 2002; Inglehart & Norris, 2003a, 2003b; Lincove, 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Yuchtman-Yaar & Alkalay, 2007). They considered Islam to be backward, misogynistic, conservative, and restricting women in ‘Islamic civilization’ from entering the labour market. While these characteristics are not said to be unique to Islam, it is argued that they are most pronounced in Islam (see Droeber, 2003).

Theoretically, this argument ignores that Islam in Mali is not the same as Islam in Pakistan or in Indonesia. The same can be said for the Christian culture in the West. The ‘civilizationist’ concept of a religious culture is thus very crude. It considers neither how different culturalizations of Islam affect the position of women, nor how different religious ideas influence these women’s positions. Empirically, the civilization argument would seem to be widely supported as prominent comparisons of country-level averages show that Muslim-majority countries have fewer women in parliament, lower women’s employment rates, and attitudes more hostile to gender equality compared to Western countries (e.g. Clark et al., 1991; Inglehart & Norris, 2003b; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Ross, 2008; Yuchtman-Yaar & Alkalay, 2007). However, first this ignores the variation among Muslim countries and people with different religions within Muslim countries are hardly compared to each other. Second, and also illustrated in Chapter 2 already, defining civilizations in terms of Muslim population or historical religious dominance leads to strong geographical clustering (see Figure 2.1) which conflates many factors with religion, from ecological circumstances such as climate, oil, and desert, to social histories such as colonization, regional